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# Party of Five : can American high school students learn about life through popular culture?

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**PARTY OF FIVE:  
CAN AMERICAN HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS LEARN  
ABOUT LIFE THROUGH POPULAR CULTURE?**

A Thesis  
Presented to  
The Faculty of the  
School of Journalism and Mass Communication  
San Jose State University

In Partial Fulfillment  
of the  
Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Science

by

Nino J. Repetti  
December 1997

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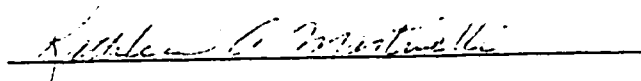
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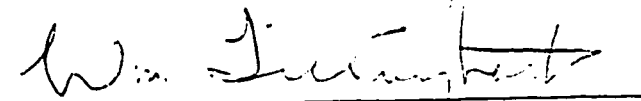
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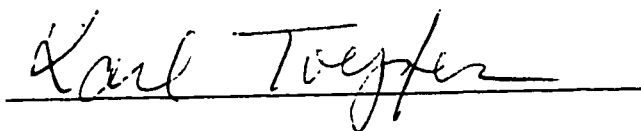
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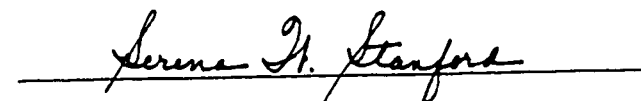


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## ABSTRACT

### PARTY OF FIVE: CAN AMERICAN HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS LEARN FROM POPULAR CULTURE?

by Nino J. Repetti

The purpose of this thesis is to determine what high school students learn by watching a popular television program, *Party of Five*, aired on the FOX network. The study, grounded in Albert Bandura's social learning theory, attempts to help explain what the students learn. The researcher conducted 13 focus group interviews with a total of 127 students from two California high schools, Monta Vista in Cupertino and San Jose High Academy. The study considered three variables important in explaining what the students learned: ethnicity, gender, and social class. The researcher found that certain portions of social learning theory and different variables contribute greatly to which messages a student takes away from the show. Gender provided the biggest difference in terms of which messages, behaviors, or characters the students identified with. Ethnicity and social class were not as influential as expected, but still showed differences in learning.



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## Introduction

The mass media have always been driven by profit. But in the 1990s, the paradigm has shifted from providing more news to offering less and making more money. Sex and violence are what people want, and popular culture is inundating them with it.

Television's apparent success at appealing to the lowest common denominator raises the question of whether a television show in the '90s is trying to communicate a message to its viewers. With so much emphasis placed on the entertainment value of television, is it possible that viewers *learn* something about the world or their own lives by watching entertainment television?

Two decades ago, television's potential as an educational tool was realized through programs such as *Sesame Street* and *3-2-1 Contact*. In the 1990s, *Barney* provided educational programming for children. But children become teenagers and the messages and values of Big Bird become too simple to use in solving the perplexing problems faced by adolescents. High school students in the '90s must look to other programs for guidance on the issues confronting their age group, such as drugs, sex, teenage pregnancy, or violence in intimate relationships, issues that were not as rampant among adolescents in prior decades.

FOX, a bold, new network, flooded its television lineup with programs aimed at teenagers in the early 1990s. Leading the way was a daring new program that triggered a chain reaction of programs targeted at teenagers and young adults.

In 1994 *Party of Five*, a show about the trials and tribulations of five siblings who lost their parents in a car accident, was born. *USA Today*, *Newsweek*, and the *New York Post* declared *Party of Five* one of the best new shows of the 1994-95 season. The December 15 issue of *TV Guide* called *Party* "The Best Show You're Not Watching," regarding the program's low-end ratings, but fiercely loyal fans. Amazingly, there are 41 web sites featuring information, pictures, and updates of *Party of Five*. However, *Party's* crowning achievement was the 1996 Golden Globe award for Best Drama, upstaging television powerhouses such as *ER*, *Murder One*, *NYPD Blue*, and *Chicago Hope* for the honor.

The show consists of three brothers, Charlie, Bailey, and Owen, and two sisters, Julia and Claudia. The five characters range in age from 25 to 2. It almost goes without saying that the characters are very attractive, but they are real people to the viewers rather than professional models who happen to be acting. The Salingers live in San Francisco and their father had opened a restaurant, appropriately named Salinger's, before he and their mother were killed by a drunken driver.

After the accident, Charlie, the eldest, who is about 25, assumes the responsibilities of raising and providing for his brothers and sisters. But Charlie is the most immature of the older children. He is a notorious ladies' man with no education beyond high school and a severe lack of leadership skills, confidence, and direction in his life. Charlie manages the restaurant now and it is successful. He is gaining more responsibility and confidence with every episode.

On the other hand, Bailey, an 18-year-old college freshman, is mature for his age and yearning to prove his mettle in the world. Bailey's street smarts, leadership abilities, and people skills more than make up for his lack of academic intelligence. However, Bailey cheated on his girlfriend, Sara, and is battling alcoholism. He is settling into regular Alcoholics Anonymous meetings and assuming the responsibilities he once had.

Next, there is Julia, a 17-year-old senior in high school, who is dying to be older and do the things grown ups do. Like many teenage girls, she is a little insecure with herself and receives a lot of her confidence and self-worth from her boyfriend. Julia is also attracted to the "bad boy image" in guys and wants to rescue them from their troubled times. What Julia lacks in street smarts, she makes up for with her caring, compassionate ways. But Julia has made two potentially fatal mistakes: she married her boyfriend, Griffin, and she turned down a scholarship to Stanford, and college altogether.

Claudia is 12 years old and the family genius. She inherited her mother's gift for playing musical instruments and takes accelerated courses in school. Her maturity level is off the charts, as she constantly provides illuminating insights during sticky situations and reveals the epiphany to the others. Claudia has a girlfriend who is a troublemaker, and Claudia falls into the trap of hanging out with the wrong crowd. But just like Julia, she manages to rescue herself from a potentially bad situation before she gets too involved. Claudia has been the glue holding the family together recently as Bailey battles alcohol, Julia skips college, and Charlie continues an unpopular relationship.

Owen is the two-year-old pleasant surprise that the parents did not count on. He supplies the "one more thing to worry about," and everyone gets to be a mother or a

father to him. His character keeps the others grounded with the family, because everyone needs to be there for Owen. Without Owen, the characters would be too free to go about their own lives, reducing the intimacy the family shares.

Outside the family, only three characters have sustained any major influence on the lives of the Salingers. Sara is Bailey's ex-girlfriend, and incredibly bright and ambitious. She is also a virgin and wishes to remain so until she gets married. Sara is also supporting Bailey through the early stages of alcoholism. Kirsten is Charlie's ex-fiancée. About a year ago, Kirsten and Charlie were set to be married, but on the wedding day Charlie had second thoughts. Kirsten left him. They were reunited, but broke up for good. Kirsten was a tremendous surrogate mother for the kids. Grace, Charlie's most recent ex-girlfriend, is a self-consumed, newly appointed city councilwoman. She is Charlie's age and is not popular with the kids, having bullied her way into the family. Grace is also the only African-American, or minority for that matter, on the show.

*Party of Five* offers its viewers many messages during the programs, but exactly what, if anything, do teenagers learn from the program? Are the viewers applying the show's lessons about life in their own lives? This is an important area of research because *Party* has a large following and "it goes almost without saying that teenagers learn from mass media" (Roberts, 1993, p. 630).

Unlike the previous quantitative popular culture and educational television studies, this paper took a qualitative approach to collecting data through focus group interviews, grounded in Albert Bandura's social learning theory (1977). The data was analyzed using

thematic analysis. The purpose of this study is to discover what and how high school viewers learn from the show *Party of Five*.

The study was driven by the following research question: To what extent can Bandura's social learning theory explain what lures high schools students to watch *Party of Five*, and exactly what messages do they take away from the show?

In addition, research questions were assigned to each portion of Bandura's theory, and explored during the focus groups with specific questions targeted for the given section.

- Attention - Why do students watch *Party*? What captures their interest in the program?
- Retention - What characters, issues, or topics do they remember and believe are important to their lives?
- Imitation - Has a student ever applied a solution to a problem presented in the show in his or her life or the life of a friend?
- Motivation - Do students believe they learn from the program, or is it just "cool" to watch for conversational purposes? Do they watch for escapism, fantasy, or entertainment? Is the show realistic to them?

Furthermore, ethnicity, gender, and social class are likely to be major factors in determining whether the students think the show is realistic, how useful it is in their lives, and exactly which messages they believe are important.



- Ethnicity - Because the main characters are Caucasian, will minority students believe the show is unrealistic, having little application in their lives?
- Gender - Will female students identify with and relate to Sara, a virgin who wishes to remain so until she is married? Will males understand and respect her decision?
- Social class - Will students from a less affluent high school think the show is unrealistic? Will students from a middle class school, similar to the *Party of Five* lifestyle, find it more realistic?

No previous study has made a concerted effort to discover the differences in learning from television involving ethnicity. In addition, variables such as gender and social class have typically not been significant in prior work.

### **Social Learning Theory**

To achieve an understanding of what messages adolescents learn from *Party of Five*, the study applied Albert Bandura's social learning theory. People are not born with attitudes, values, perceptions of the world, and repertoires of behavior (Bandura, 1977). These characteristics must be learned from external stimuli. Early learning theories attempted to explain how people and animals acquire wide ranges of behavior. However, those theories did not take into account the motivations humans have for imitating behavior. The modern social learning theory goes a step further because it acknowledges that people learn through observing others and the instructions of others. and from direct experience.

For example, when a young child first begins playing catch with a parent, the task is very difficult. But if the child can watch two other people play catch and someone will show the child how to trap the ball against his chest, the child can learn much faster. And if the child is congratulated with a hug or a “high five” after a nice catch, the child’s actions are reinforced with a reward. Reinforcement serves as a motivator through its incentive value. When people deal with everyday events, some of their responses prove successful, such as catching the ball. Other responses have no effect or result in punishing outcomes, if the ball hits the child hard on the arm, for example. Through this learning process, successful forms of behavior are eventually selected and ineffectual ones are discarded (Bandura, 1977, p. 17).

Social learning theory is particularly relevant to mass communication because many of the behaviors, attitudes, and values viewers learn through modeling are first observed through the mass media. Moreover, television viewers are more likely to imitate behavior that is rewarded on television than behavior that is not rewarded. This process is known as vicarious reinforcement, observing others being reinforced for performing certain behaviors, and can have a major impact on viewers (Bandura, 1977).

Bandura asserts that people learn from the mass media in three ways: inhibitory effects, disinhibitory effects, and observational learning. Inhibitory effects means observers are less likely to imitate the actions of a person after seeing the subject punished for those behaviors. For example, viewers of *Home Improvement* watch as Tim fumbles and gaffes his way through life as a husband and father. Sometimes his wife punishes his machoness. Therefore, people will not model the behavior of someone who is punished for

inappropriate behavior, such as grunting at the dinner table. Disinhibitory effects involve viewers imitating prohibited behavior seen on television after seeing the character rewarded. For example, a young man who watches *90210* may imitate Brandon's slick, sartorial style to impress young women. The reward or reinforcement that perpetuates the behavior is the attention of females.

Both inhibitory and disinhibitory effects are the result of modeling behavior after seeing a character rewarded or punished. This study focuses its research on the idea of observational learning, which attempts to explain how viewers of mass media and popular culture can learn patterns of behavior by watching the representations depicted in the media (Bandura, 1986). According to Bandura, such social learning is broken down into four elements: attention, retention, imitation, and motivation (Bandura, 1977).

### **Attention**

"We can have some impact to entertain and when it's over, to get the audience to think about what they have seen, for maybe five seconds" (Simonetti, 1994, p. 39). Before *90210* can communicate a message to its viewers, for whatever length of time, the show must first get their attention. According to Bandura, attention to an event is determined both by the characteristics of the event and by the characteristics of the observer (Bandura, 1986). Before learning can begin, people must attend to an event and perceive the activities that they identify with the most and the behavior or actions that are most enjoyable, shocking, or intriguing to them. Even if the viewer misinterprets the behavior, it must be given attention.

Therefore, adolescents observing *Party* will be attracted to different characters as well as to different behaviors. A male viewer of *Party* may identify with the male characters on the show and relate even more closely to the character that the viewer considers himself most similar to. For example, a young man who is handsome and very popular with young women may identify with Charlie or Bailey. This identification can also extend into physical similarities such as hairstyle, mannerisms, physical build, and clothes. Identifying with characters is not a requirement of attention; however, viewers who believe that characters resemble them are more likely to pay attention. A final component of attention is arousal. If a viewer is emotionally aroused, such as excited, afraid, or anxious, the viewer will be more attentive to the behavior. Arousal is conducive to learning, however it is not a necessary requirement in order for modeling or learning to occur (Bandura, 1986).

### **Retention**

People cannot be greatly influenced by the observation of modeled activities if they do not remember them. Retention refers to the performance or memory of an observed event after the model is no longer present (Bandura, 1986). Retention occurs through the use of symbols in viewers' minds that represent the behavior they have observed. The symbols are stored as images or verbal language. Imaginal representation involves creating a picture of the observed act in one's mind and committing it to memory. However, verbal representation accounts for the speed with which humans learn through observation. For example, giving directions to a friend is done through verbal symbols, such as right on

First Street, left on Maple. It would be impossible to code street directions in visual imagery, so people use language to retain the information.

The final element of retention is mentally rehearsing the act before physically or verbally performing. Observational learning is most accurate when people first organize the events as images or verbal representations, mentally rehearse the modeled behavior, and then enact it overtly (Bandura, 1986).

Therefore, viewers of *Party* retain modeled behavior through images and language. The ability to symbolize what is viewed is what enables people to learn behavior from observation. Viewers of *Party* may use imaginal or verbal representation to remember how the show's specific characters handled certain problems, and then may apply the behavior they have seen. For example, a young man's girlfriend tells him that she is pregnant with his child. The pregnant woman is unsure of what to do and is thinking, "My parents are going to kill me!" Her boyfriend may recall the episode of *Party* in which Julia realized she was pregnant and her boyfriend rushed to support her. The actual dialogue used to comfort Julia could be recalled and used in this situation. Thus retention is the factor that guides imitation; before viewers can begin to imitate or be motivated by *Party*, they have to remember the behavior to which they were previously exposed.

### **Imitation**

The third element in observational learning is imitation, which refers to the re-enactment of observed behaviors. Imitation involves organizing the responses of the observed behavior, initiating them, monitoring, and refining the behavior through

informative feedback from peers or self-criticism (Bandura, 1986). Thought precedes every action, and the learned behavior cannot be performed without thinking.

But why do viewers imitate certain behaviors and not others? Bandura (1986) asserted that imitation is fueled by repetition and/or reinforcement. If modeled behavior is repeated over a period of time, then the act can become a learned behavior for the observer. For example, children tend to imitate repeated behavior by their parents. As the imitation continues, the adults' behavior becomes an incentive for the child to mimic them (Bandura, 1986). Children look up to their parents and as the behavior continues, children will imitate it. People will gradually perform only those behaviors that allow for instant gratification, regardless of whether the behavior is positive or negative.

For example, a young man who is unpopular with females may decide to imitate Charlie. He buys the same clothes as Charlie, adopts the same mannerisms, and even stops shaving to mimic Charlie's perpetual stubble. This young man is imitating Charlie because he too wants to be attractive to women. His motivation is to gain the attention of females, and the act of imitating Charlie shows which messages he learns from the program.

The present study asked whether adolescents learn from *Party* and if imitation is part of the learning process. Data was generated by asking adolescents which behaviors, if any, they have learned from the show and which they have implemented in their lives.

## **Motivation**

The fourth element of social learning theory is motivation, which stipulates that people will imitate certain behavior if they think they will be rewarded. Social learning theory argues that people will not re-enact everything they learn, only the behavior that is rewarded. For example, the young man who is imitating Charlie in order to be attractive to women is doing so because he has seen the rewards Charlie receives. The attention and affection of young women is what motivates the young man to imitate Charlie's behaviors. In other words, the implementation of observed behavior will occur only if the subjects believe they will be compensated for their actions.

Social learning theory describes three types of reinforcement that influence that observed behaviors people model. The first, external reinforcement, occurs when others reward an individual's behavior. For example, in one study, a withdrawn boy was spending about 80% of his time secluded in isolated areas of the nursery school. The teachers reinforced his feelings of loneliness by paying a lot of attention to him. Later, when the teachers stopped rewarding his seclusiveness, he joined the group (Bandura, 1977). Once the external reinforcement was removed, the boy's reclusive behavior stopped.

The second type of reinforcement, vicarious, involves watching others receive compliments or criticism from their behaviors. As a rule, seeing behavior succeed for others increases the tendency to behave in similar ways, while seeing behavior punished decreases the tendency (Bandura, 1977). For example, if a young child sees an adult burn his or her hand touching a pot, the child will learn not to touch a boiling pot. The child does not need to burn herself in order to learn. Bandura argued that mass media can have

the same effect. He noted that people will learn from the characters and what they see on television.

Finally, self-reinforcement involves an individual's strong desire to hold on to certain beliefs, religion for example. Self-reinforcement refers to a process in which individuals enhance and maintain their own behavior by rewarding themselves with rewards that they can control (Bandura, 1977). For example, Bailey's ex-girlfriend, Sara, wants to be a virgin when they get married. She and Bailey never had sex, even though they have dated for some time. Sara is providing her own reinforcement that this is what she wants. No one is pressuring her to stay a virgin.

The research questions in this study assigned to each element of the theory will provide information concerning which messages students are learning from the show.

Attention and retention, the first two elements of the theory, will help explain what they are learning. Through focus group interviews, the students, with the help of the researcher, discussed why the students watch the show, such as the attractive characters, fashionable clothes, sexual scenes, and what episodes, issues, or messages they remembered. This portion of the interviews was designed to measure why students give the show their attention and what they retain from it.

Imitation and motivation can help explain how the students use what they learn from the program. The researcher asked the students if they identify with any of the characters and why they feel that way. Students may also want to be like a certain character even though they are not similar. This process supplied information on imitation of behavior, and showed to what extent identification is significant to learning. The



students were also asked if they have used any of the messages or advice from the show in their own lives or know of someone who did. These questions targeted their motivation for calling on an episode that was useful in their lives or the life of a friend. Moreover, this demonstrated if any learning is took place, even if the students did not realize it.

### **Literature Review**

Adolescents are not born with the attitudes and behaviors that guide them through their teenage years. Therefore, they must learn them, but from where?

Numerous studies document that adolescents learn from television. With the emergence of mass media in our daily lives, "media influence is no longer limited to changing or reinforcing opinions, attitudes, and behaviors" (Tan, 1986, p. 243). In fact, with teen-related shows, such as *Party of Five*, mass media have become important adolescent socializing agents, which create and shape many of society's shared "attitudes, values, behaviors, and perceptions of social reality" (Tan, 1986, p. 243).

In 1944, Herzog interviewed housewives about the gratifications derived from listening to radio soap operas. She found that answers fell into three broad areas in order of importance: emotional release, a basis for fantasy, and a provider of information about the world (Condry, 1989, p. 44).

According to Donald Roberts, mass media messages affect adolescents and what they learn (1993, p.635). Roberts emphasizes that different adolescents focus on different messages, thus causing them to learn different things from mass media. Clearly, what is learned or interpreted from a show will depend on what concerns or problems an adolescent viewer brings to the screen (Roberts, 1993). Therefore, a focus of the study is

to identify what these differences are to achieve a better understanding of what is being learned and how.

Roberts uses an example from *Beverly Hills 90210*, a highly popular teenage show on FOX, to help explain how two adolescents could watch the same show and walk away with different meanings. Roberts used an episode of *90210* that focused on an evolving romantic relationship where the boy and the girl were forbidden to see each other by their parents. Roberts said the message received will “depend on the developmental task the viewer currently faces” (Roberts, 1993, p. 634). Some adolescents may learn about romantic relationships, and others may learn about “parent-child interaction” (p. 634). Roberts argues the appropriate research question to ask is which messages, under which conditions, influence what adolescents learn?

But television competes with information from many other powerful sources, such as parents, teachers, and friends. Roberts said that “whenever an adolescent faces a particular issue, it can almost ‘consume’ him or her in the sense that it simultaneously creates a deep thirst for information about the task” (p. 631). Many of the developmental issues that adolescents face are too embarrassing and too difficult for some parents to address. “The resulting absence of competing information lends the mass media additional influence” (p. 638). This makes television a powerful information source among adolescents.

Roberts emphasizes two very important elements of this study. First, Roberts shows why adolescents learn from television with reasons ranging from lack of a better source of information, to the trials and tribulations that are a persistent part of an adolescent's life.

Second, Roberts emphasizes that teenagers embrace and seek information presented on television, especially from those shows that deal with teenage issues

(Roberts, 1993). "*Beverly Hills 90210* is the *thirtysomething* for teen-agers, a show in which viewers see their problems magnified, chewed over, and worried to death by its characters" (James, 1991, p. H29). If adolescents are actively seeking information from television, then they are more likely to be motivated, to imitate and to retain what they see, which are the essential parts of the social learning theory and the research.

Several theories have been developed to explain why the media is such an effective learning tool, and "some theories have been successful in their ability to show that exposure to the media leads to certain attitudes and behaviors" (Potter, 1990, p. 843). Potter's (1990) study emphasized that social learning theory is able to provide empirical evidence that shows a link between exposure to a certain television message and leads to a particular behavior following the exposure.

Potter gathered data from 308 students ranging in age from 11 to 18. He was trying to discover if heavy viewers of television take what they learn from shows and apply them to their everyday lives more than do light viewers. Potter's study consisted of a two-part questionnaire distributed to students enrolled in grades eight through 12. The first questionnaire measured regular television viewing habits, and the second part concentrated on what themes students found most important from general television programs.

Potter discovered that the three central themes for general viewing are "honesty is the best policy, good wins over evil, and hard work yields rewards" (1990, p. 848). These findings are encouraging to this study, because if Potter could find central themes for general viewing, then the data should yield central themes for *Party*. Potter's exact themes are not likely to be replicated in this study. However, the mere presence of themes, whatever they turn out to be, will give this study a better understanding of what adolescents are learning from *Party*.

In addition, Potter noted that if a story or plot relies on "relatively stable and common images," as *Party* does, then there should be a dominant lesson depicted throughout the program (Potter, 1990 p. 844). This study hopes to find the dominant lessons adolescents take from the show.

In the 1980s, many studies were conducted on the uses and gratifications theory and cultivation analysis, attempting to explain what made soap operas so attractive to viewers, and what effects heavy soap opera viewing had on the individuals' perceptions of reality. These studies were not concerned with learning, but rather they were used as marketing tools by the networks to find out what people really wanted in soap operas to increase ratings.

Dafna Lemish (1985) studied soap opera viewing by college students in public college locations. While Lemish's study was grounded in the uses and gratifications perspective not social learning theory, her study was the only one using a qualitative approach. Lemish collected data in the field by using participant observation and in-depth interviews. The students observed were watching *General Hospital* in two campus locations: a sports lounge and the student union at Ohio State University. Lemish totaled 80 hours of observation. Her sample was comprised of mostly white undergraduates in their late teens to early twenties (1985). The majority of viewers were female.

She found that there were four types of viewers: the leader, follower, observer, and the challenger. Leaders were extremely active during the program, either physically or socially. They were highly knowledgeable of the show's plot and the characters' doings. The followers were very attentive to the show and to the leaders. They were by no means

passive viewers, and were actively conversing. The content of the program was important to these types of viewers.

On the other hand, the observers were relatively quiet and seated much further back than the leaders and followers. They were well informed, but clearly present for the social setting, not the content. Finally, the challenger made disapproving remarks about how people could actually tolerate programs like this. Challengers were *General Hospital* regulars, but were afraid to admit they enjoyed the program.

On why he watched the show, one viewer said, "It brings out the 'what would I do in that situation'... I don't think it really fills any needs but it brings to the surface thoughts I might not have had" (Lemish, 1985, p. 286). The majority of viewers said that soap operas did not influence their lives outside the room, but they were "hooked." Lemish did not specify what category this viewer was in.

This is an example of learning, albeit with reservation. The student has admitted to attention, possible imitation, and social motivation to continue to watch the show. If Lemish's questions were designed to target the learning of messages, she might have found that the issues and topics covered in the show were useful in the lives of the viewers. If the student would have mentioned a particular episode or event, that would have shown retention, the third element of Bandura's theory. Lemish's study is relevant to the present study because she provides the example of how qualitative data collection and subject interviews serve as methods of measuring learning.

Carolyn Lin analyzed "the viewing motives, activities, and satisfaction of adolescents," from television (Lin, 1993, p. 224). Lin conducted her study within the boundaries of the uses and gratification perspective, which assumes that behaviors are motivated by certain needs of the viewers. Lin worked from the assumption that viewers of television content are seeking to fulfill these internal needs. She found that strongly

motivated viewers received greater satisfaction from television than less motivated viewers.

Furthermore, Lin demonstrated that the nature of the show could constitute “retention of the content” (Lin, 1993, p. 228). According to this logic, one can assume that the more the content fulfills an individual’s needs, the more likely that individual is to retain the content of the show.

Lin studied 444 students in grades seven through 10 in two suburban middle-class communities. Each student was given a self-administered survey asking questions about the importance of television viewing as a daily activity. To help determine the gratification each student felt toward television, the students were asked to recall how long after the show they thought about its contents, and how they felt when they missed their favorite show. Lin found that the “heavy or active viewers” of television are more inclined to learn from, and reflect on the shows they watch (Lin, 1993, p. 240).

Lin’s findings also help to understand two key components of the social learning theory, attention and retention. Based on these findings, attention and retention are present when a show can fulfill an adolescent’s needs (Lin, 1993). By using a thematic analysis approach to the data, the study will attempt to pin-point exactly what needs are being fulfilled, thus giving a more complete answer for what is being learned.

Elizabeth Perse (1986) also conducted a study on soap operas, but used the cultivation analysis theory, as well as a quantitative method. Cultivation researchers believed that heavy viewing would lead to a distorted view of the world, with the viewers becoming more fearful of society. Heavy viewers were also watching unselectively, meaning they watched not on the basis of content, but on the availability of the show and the time of day.

Perse hypothesized that ritualized viewers would exhibit higher levels of cultivation. In addition, she postulated that viewing motives would be associated with high levels of soap opera exposure, high levels of soap opera affinity, and lower levels of perceived realism (1986).

Subjects were asked why they watched soap operas based on five criteria: exciting entertainment, habit-pass time, information, relax-escape, and voyeurism. Perse measured viewing behaviors by asking about general television exposure, soap opera viewing duration, soap opera exposure, nonserial television exposure. In the findings, Perse's first hypothesis was not supported, meaning ritualized viewers did not exhibit high levels of exposure, affinity, duration, and lower realism. The subjects listed their reasons for watching as primarily information, followed by entertainment, relaxation, and voyeurism. Furthermore, Perse's second hypothesis of heavy viewers' higher levels of cultivation also was not supported. "Although the television content may be portrayed realistically, it is not always perceived by viewers as realistic" (1986, p. 188).

Perse's study did support the notion that viewers of soap operas are interested more in information than entertainment and steamy scenes. The above studies based on uses and gratifications and cultivation analysis may not be asking the most important question: What is being learned? Social learning theory is a mechanism capable of addressing why viewers watch (attention and motivation) and what messages they take from the show (retention and imitation).

Austin Babrow's 1989 study on student audiences of soap operas indicated that the desire to learn is a non-factor in determining adolescent exposure to soap operas, whereas entertainment and social interaction played a major role in indicating exposure levels. At first glance these findings would appear to contradict what the study is trying to determine. However, as Babrow pointed out, "students may be embarrassed to admit that

learning is a motive for watching soap operas" (Babrow, 1989, p. 172). Many of the students will say they learn "nothing" from the show because that probably is the "cool" answer. Instead, the questions must target comments on certain show topics in which they do not directly say what they are learning from the show, but their responses show that learning did occur.

Alison Alexander (1985) raised an interesting issue in her study examining the links between soap opera viewing and an adolescent's perception of relationships. Alexander noted that on a typical day in America, three million adolescents are watching soap operas. "An emerging awareness of the popularity of soap operas among teenagers has given rise to the public concern about what these young viewers may be learning from their exposure" (Alexander, 1985, p. 295). The most important thing teenagers could be learning from soap operas is about intimate relationships (Alexander, 1985). She discovered that there was a link between why people were watching the show and what they were learning. Her findings "highlight the importance of studying adolescents' soap opera viewing habits" (Alexander, 1985, p. 307).

If there is a public concern about three million adolescents getting their "intimate relationship" advice from a program like *All My Children*, the fact that more than 10 million adolescents are receiving advice about their intimate relationships from Bailey Salinger, a lead character in *Party of Five*, should be cause for even bigger public concern. For example, Bailey has always been the good guy on the show, but he recently cheated on his girlfriend.

Some theorists and researchers would argue there is no need to study how and what adolescents are learning from *Party* because we already know that viewers learn based on past research. However, Sonia Livingstone described the driving force behind this research when she noted, "We cannot know what contents to correlate with which



beliefs, or what 'effects' might result from which viewing, or indeed why people choose to watch a certain programs over others, unless we first know how they interpret and make sense of these programs" (Livingstone, 1989, p. 26).

"The regularity and time scale over which viewers become involved with soap operas certainly ensures considerable naturally acquired knowledge whose structure can be investigated" (Livingstone, 1989, p. 26). Identifying themes that are discussed by the viewers will lead to understanding exactly what messages are being attended to and what is being learned.

Another study attempted to answer the question of what attracts viewers by studying how movie films may affect juvenile delinquents through the process known as social learning. Scott Snyder, M.D., medical director of the Adolescent Psychiatric Program at Charles Wind Hospital, found that identification with a movie and its characters is common among adolescent viewers: "The moviemaker often tries to persuade the viewer to experience vicariously the events unfolding on the screen. Identification is one of the principal ways in which an adolescent may become vicariously involved with a film" (1991, p. 122). In fact, Snyder further found that as long as an adolescent identified with the character in the movie, antisocial and violent acts were found to be accepted.

Snyder was able to explain the phenomenon of identification through the idea of the "reinforcement of values" (Snyder, 1991 p.122). Through this type of identification, adolescent viewers will identify with their own set of characteristics and ignore the others. This enables adolescents to identify with certain characters who have negative characteristics. For example, some adolescents identify with Charlie because he has the image of a bad boy on *Party*.

The idea that adolescents identify with certain characters is vital to this study and the attempt to clarify how and what adolescents learn from *Party of Five*. If adolescents are identifying with the characters in a movie they see once or maybe twice, they should more easily identify with characters they can see once a week on *Party*. It is apparent from Snyder's study that the more an adolescent identifies with a character, the more likely he is to learn and imitate what he observes. This reasoning offers more integration of the third component of the social learning theory, imitation. Moreover, Snyder introduces the concept of imitating "bad" behavior, or behavior that is not positively reinforced or rewarded, but provides gratification. Snyder makes the claim that this kind of behavior is still learned from movies.

When *Sesame Street* became popular in the early 1970s, studies focused on what children learned from the show. But toward the latter half of the decade, the emphasis shifted to how children learn when viewing, such as with the help of a parent or through the slow pace and entertaining format of *Sesame Street*. These studies were not usually grounded in theoretical frameworks.

*Sesame Street* has influenced the personal character of many American children. But Rice, Huston, Truglio, and Wright (1990) argued that *Sesame Street* also can increase children's vocabulary while they watch the most popular educational television show ever created. The purpose of their study was to determine whether young children learn new words when viewing *Sesame Street* under normal home viewing conditions. The authors found that viewing the program made a significant development in the child's vocabulary, but that its influence stopped at a certain age. Children aged three or five had improved,

however seven-year-olds showed no correlation between viewing and vocabulary.

Vocabulary benefits of the program began to decline after the age of five and a half.

In a later study of *Sesame Street*, Pinon, Huston, and Wright (1989) found very similar results, and also discovered the parents' education levels were significant at any age level. But the amount of encouragement they provided the child to watch the show and their general attitudes about television viewing were only factors for younger children.

*Sesame Street* aside, another studies results supported that parental encouragement and education levels are major factors in children's aspirations. "It is important that we begin to understand the dynamics of the interaction of race, class, and gender in settings inside and outside of schools" (McCarthy, 1988, p. 275). Kevin Marjoribanks conducted a study to discover what effects ethnicity, gender, and social class had on adolescents' learning environments and their aspirations.

Data were gathered from 400 16-year-old Australian students (Marjoribanks, 1988). The students' ethnic backgrounds were AngloAustralian, Greek, or Southern Italian families. For analysis purposes, the groups were broken down into ethnicity, gender, and lower or middle class.

Interviews with the parents were conducted in their homes, and a family's social status was measured by a composite of the parents' occupation and education. Students were given a structured questionnaire to measure their perceptions of their family learning environments. The subjects also responded to the extent of encouragement and positive reinforcement from their teachers and their school. Finally, students answered questions regarding the education level they expected to receive, and the job they thought they would have when they were 25 years old. In general, Marjoribanks found that parental support for their child's learning had moderate to strong effects on their educational

desires. However, the encouragement received at school had a zero to moderate effect on educational aspirations.

For male Southern Italians and female Greeks there were no significant connections between parental support for learning and the child's occupational aspirations. But in other ethnic groups, the association for parent support for learning showed a modest to moderate linkage. Lower class Southern Italian females and lower class AngloAustralian females expressed much lower occupational desires.

Marjoribanks' study shows that even in lower class families, students who receive strong parental encouragement have higher educational aspirations. "If the human capital possessed by parents is not complemented by social capital embodied in family relations, it is irrelevant to the child's educational growth that the parent has a great deal of human capital" (Coleman, 1988, p. S110).

Although Marjoribanks' study does not provide the same ethnic diversity that America has to offer, the study offers a blueprint on how to control for ethnicity, gender, and social status. His study is the only one that made a conscious effort to look at race and social class. Therefore, the idea that in certain social groups, learning is encouraged, is crucial to this study because students may watch *Party* with each other or their families.

Although overwhelming majority of this literature review has focused on pro-social studies of television use, there are studies or examples of imitated behavior stemming from popular culture exposure. These examples can further demonstrate the power of television and the mass media.

In February 1959, German citizen Heinrich Pommerencke went to the movies, "and after seeing a bunch of women cavorting on the screen, he became convinced that all women were immoral and deserved to die. Shortly thereafter, he committed the first of

four savage rape-murders” (Schechter, 1995, p. E15). The movie triggering this bloodbath was Cecil B. DeMille’s “The Ten Commandments.”

Most recently, in the film *Money Train*, starring Wesley Snipes and Woody Harelson, a psycho soaks a New York subway token booth and its clerk with flammable liquid, then torches them both -- but the clerk escapes with few injuries. In real life a clerk was seared and his body covered with third-degree burns (Streisand, 1995, p. 19). Defenders of *Money Train* say behavior like this began in the 1980s, not with the film. “We asked, ‘How do token booths get blown up?’ ” said a person involved in making the film.

In 1967, Rod Serling wrote a television movie about a crazed mechanic who plants a bomb on a commercial jet, spawning eight copycat bomb threats in six days. “I wish to Christ I had written a stagecoach drama starring John Wayne instead. I wish I’d never been born,” Serling said (Streisand, 1995, p.19).

In some cases, research has shown that a movie was a blueprint for crime. Albert Bandura studied the effects of a 1966 film, *The Doomsday Flight*, in which the extortionist put an altitude-sensitive bomb on an airplane and set it to go off if the plane descended below 5,000 feet (Grimes, 1995, p. B1). He found that in every country where the film was shown, it immediately inspired copycat crimes, some of them successful. Qantas Airlines paid almost \$500,000 in extortion money (Grimes, 1995, p.B1).

While these examples may seem extreme, they provide a clearer picture concerning the power of mass media in influencing anti-social behaviors. Moreover, they offer another perspective on television’s influence on behavior. The message presented by these examples, and the previous pro-social studies, is clear: popular culture has a large impact on the people who watch it. This study hopes to offer a new insight on how popular culture can positively affect the behavior and mannerisms of young people.

## Methodology

In order to effectively answer the general research question of what and how students learn from *Party*, the study used focus group interviews with "heavy viewers" of *Party of Five*. According to Lin's research, "heavy viewers" of *Party* are more familiar with the characters and have a better ability to recall the topics and issues covered throughout the shows (1993). A sample of students comprised of people who are not familiar with the show would provide no relevant data to the study. Because the study attempted to show whether *Party of Five* influences learning, the population needed to be knowledgeable about the program. Furthermore, if "heavy viewers" were not used, Bandura's social learning theory would have been rendered useless. How can a participant in this study be questioned on what she attended to, retained, imitated, and was motivated by if she never watched the show?

Potter's study also justifies the use of "heavy viewers" in this study. From a learning perspective, the adolescents who are considered "heavy viewers" should be better able to recall the lessons of a television show (1990). If this statement is true, "heavy viewers" of *Party* should be better able to recall the lessons portrayed throughout the show, which is a key component in determining what is learned. "Lighter viewers" would be less able to recall these lessons or talk about learning they may have experienced (Potter, 1990). Therefore, it would be impossible to determine if the students have learned from the show or if they just do not know what the show is about. The selection of "heavy viewers" for the interview process provided a population with the ability to express what they have learned from the show.

Therefore, a definition of a "heavy viewer" is in order. A "heavy viewer" was defined as an individual who watched *Party* three or more times a month. *Party of Five* is

aired weekly and is not syndicated. A person who watched only twice a month was considered “moderate.”

Realizing the importance of “heavy viewers,” the study called for a two-step research method that consisted of a questionnaire and an interview process. The questionnaires were designed to create a large pool of possible interview participants, which would allow for the selection of the best possible participants for the focus group interviews. The questionnaires supplied the population for the focus groups. It is important to note that the questionnaires were not used as data in the final study. The questionnaires merely selected the population from which the researcher chose the subjects based on knowledge of the show and willingness to participate.

The first step of the research method was to administer a questionnaire. The questionnaire asked two general questions about the participant, followed by five questions on the participant’s television viewing habits, and the participant’s viewing habits of *Party of Five* (see Appendix A).

More than 300 students from two local high schools completed the questionnaires. Of those students, 127 were interviewed in 13 focus groups during seven days. Monta Vista High School in Cupertino and San Jose High Academy agreed to the administration of the questionnaire and interviewing of their students (see Appendix B). Monta Vista is a middle to upper-class high school with 1,900 students, and 78 students (18 male and 60 female) participated in 8 focus groups during four days. Monta Vista’s ethnic demographics as a school are as follows: Asian 50%, White 44%, Hispanic 5%, Black 1%, Pacific Islander 1%. It should be noted that Monta Vista’s definition of white and Asian is skewed and terribly inaccurate. According to Monta Vista protocol, any student from Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Turkey, or Iraq was classified as White. Also, students from

India were categorized as Asian. Thus, has there been a Middle Eastern category, both White and Asian would not have been so high.

San Jose High Academy is a less affluent school with 981 total students, and 49 (19 male and 30 female) participated in five focus groups, spanning three days. San Jose's ethnic breakdown is as follows: Hispanic 57%, White 28%, Asian 8%, Filipino 4%, Black 2% and three other categories under one percent (see Appendix C). Social class was determined by the high school the students attend (Monta Vista equaling middle class and San Jose representing less affluent). With a total of 127 students participating, the combined ethnic makeup of the focus groups are as follows: 50 White, 38 Hispanic, 26 Asian, 6 Middle Eastern, 3 Pacific Islander, 2 Black, 2 Mixed race. Contrary to Monta Vista, the researcher included a category of Middle Eastern, comprising the countries between Turkey and India and extending south to Saudi Arabia. Israel was excluded from the category. The focus groups contained about 10 students. Because major maturity differences exist between the range of class standing in a four-year high school (e.g. freshmen vs. seniors), only juniors (58 students) and seniors (69 students) participated in the questionnaires and interviews.

In Marjoribanks (1991) study, the sample was only Anglo-Saxon, whereas this sample included White, Hispanic, Asian, African-American, Middle Eastern, and Pacific Islander. This variable offered more information and insight to Marjoribanks' claim that children who receive positive learning reinforcement, regardless of their social class, will have higher aspirations toward learning. *Party of Five* is a middle-class, white program, and the diversity of these schools should provide useful ethnic, as well as socio-economic variables.

After the questionnaires were completed, students were chosen to participate in the interviews based on their exposure to the show and their willingness to participate.



Students were given a permission slip to be signed by their parents before the interview process (see Appendix D). No student was allowed in the interview room without a signed slip.

The second step of the research method consisted of in-depth focus group interviews. Focus groups were determined to be the appropriate interview method because the adolescents needed to feel comfortable when disclosing personal interpretations and perceptions of *Party*, rather than simply categorizing responses as a survey would do. The essence of the study revolved around the ability to understand how and what adolescents are learning from *Party*. A one-on-one interview might have made the adolescent feel uncomfortable, which could have hindered the types of responses received. The focus group questions were designed to target each area of the social learning theory to provide examples of each for data analysis section (see Appendix E).

This method is also similar to that of Lemish, who recorded participant observation interviews in the field, although her interviews were one-on-one (1985). In her results and analysis section, she used actual excerpts from the interviews to substantiate her hypotheses. Lemish's study was the only one to collect and analyze data in a qualitative form.

The focus groups followed an interview guide approach, as outlined by Patton (1990). The wording of the questions was predetermined, but the researcher asked the questions in the natural order of the interview. Questions were not scripted to appear in any certain order. In addition, the questions were categorized by the elements of social learning theory. The strengths of focus groups are the ability to gather extensive and comprehensive data through informal interviews. If it appears that important data is being omitted, the researcher could word questions differently each time to create a variety of responses to the same questions.

The researcher conducted two focus groups per day at the same school to avoid any contamination of data that could result from conversations between students who have already been interviewed and those who have not. The focus groups were held at lunch and immediately after school. Each session lasted about 30-40 minutes. Refreshments were provided. The focus group interviews were recorded on audio cassette to ensure a verbatim transcript of the events.

The researcher also created one focus group with all females and another with all minorities. It was believed that specialized focus groups may produce better data. For example, females might be more open about certain issues if there are no males in the group. And minorities may be more apt to talk about identification with characters, or lack thereof, with no caucasians present. In addition, isolating minority groups and gender could mediate the expected embarrassment to admit learning from watching a soap opera, as discussed by Babrow (1989). Roberts (1993) also wrote that different adolescents learn different things from popular culture.

Immediately after the interviews, the researcher began transcribing the data and recording which individual said what, with emphasis on the ethnicity of the students and their responses. This enabled the researcher to measure the responses of the specific ethnic groups.

### Pretesting

In order to determine the effectiveness of the interview questions, a pre-test interview was conducted on seven high school teenagers (6 females and 1 male) from a local high school not involved in the focus groups, Mitty High School in San Jose. This was done in an attempt to make the pre-test as realistic as possible and to evaluate which types of questions best target different areas of the social learning theory.

The pre-test helped solidify the reasoning behind using interviews in general, and more specifically focus group interviews. The pretest also determined the effectiveness of the interview questions. Obtaining the responses necessary to answer the research question would have been impossible through a written survey, because the research question needs an interviewer with the ability to get the adolescents to think about their answers and elaborate on their responses. The pre-test also allowed the interviewer to modify questions and to improve on interviewing skills.

Because the study was designed to learn what the adolescents retained from the show, no external stimuli were provided, such as the viewing of an episode from the show. The students would have only regurgitated the message they saw and possibly felt pressured to talk about an issue they were not comfortable with. This type of retention or learning would not support Bandura's theory because it does not test retention or attention in a voluntary manner. The students would have been forced to attend to a section of the show they do not care about. Instead, the researcher instigated the conversation by offering to talk about someone's favorite character. The students started talking about everything they could think of and the researcher only guided the discussion in new directions.

This was one weakness of the Lemish's study (1986). Viewers may not have truly learned a message present in the show because she interviewed them immediately following viewing. In addition, her subjects could provide no examples of how that information was useful in their lives.

### Interview Questions

The interview questions were broken down into five sections: Icebreaker Questions, Attention, Retention, Imitation, and Motivation questions. These sections, with

the exception of the Icebreakers, specifically targeted each area of Bandura's social learning theory to show to what extent it can explain whether and what students learned from the show. The icebreaker questions asked for general information such as, "How old are you," and "With whom do you watch *Party*?" These questions were designed to initiate the conversation and to make the group participants feel more comfortable with the interviewer.

The attention questions were structured to probe for more specific information, such as "Why do you watch *Party*" and "What's the difference between *Party* and *90210* or *Melrose Place*?" Lemish (1985) provided the impetus for the question "Why do you watch the show?" Her study showed that one subject admitted he sought information about life through the program. In addition, this question can open a myriad of truthful responses ranging from social interaction and fashion tips to beautiful girls.

The retention section was designed to see what the subjects remembered from the show, such as "Who are your favorite characters" and "What do each of them stand for." Babrow (1989) demonstrated that the questions should also target topics and issues covered in the show. He found that the situations surrounding the characters' lives were huge factors in determining if subjects watched the show. Furthermore, Lin (1993) wrote that the nature of the show equaled the amount of content the viewers remembered, further testing Bandura's theory. The researcher encouraged free recall of episodes and events.

The imitation questions determined if teenagers were imitating what they observed on television, which is a key component of Bandura's social learning theory. In this section the interviewer asked questions such as, "Do any of your friends remind you of a character on *Party*? Why?" and "If you had to guess which female characters most girls try to be like who would it be and why?" Snyder (1991) questioned his subjects as to

whether they were drawn to the movies through vicarious experience of the characters. He discovered that identification with the characters was a critical component to their viewing. Snyder's findings spawned the questions for this study regarding imitation of characters by the subjects themselves or by their friends.

The motivation portion asked the participants if they believe they learn from watching the show. The purpose of these questions was to determine if the teenagers think they are learning from *Party*, and if they think the show is realistic. Perse (1986) asked her subjects if they watched for information, entertainment, or relaxation purposes. She found that the majority of people watched for information and that they would admit to learning. The interview questions are constructed to determine if attention, retention, imitation, and motivation played a role in the adolescent's learning process.

Furthermore, the questions were designed in a manner that allowed the interviewer to determine whether Bandura's social learning theory applies to *Party* and adolescent learning. Questions such as "Why do you watch *Party*?" or "What do you like about the show?" determined what appealed to the adolescents. The interviewer also asked questions such as "What are some of the topics covered on the show?" or "Can you remember an episode that you learned from?"

In order to determine if the adolescents were imitating behaviors and attitudes on the show, third person association questions were used, such as "Do any of your friends remind you of a character on *Party*?" or "If you had to guess which female character your friends most try to be like, who would it be?" To determine if the adolescent was motivated to learn, the interviewer asked questions such as "Do a lot of kids talk about the show the day after a new episode?" or "Is it cool to watch?" Other questions were designed to show which characters the students identify with.

These questions were also targeting identification, which Snyder (1991) argued was important. If a viewer can relate with a character on a show, he wrote, then learning is much more likely to occur and the viewer will continue to watch (1991).

One crucial component to the interviews was the use of scenarios depicted in the show. Each character has been presented with several crises in his or her lives. The students have related to and learned from these instances. When the students provided their own examples, they were providing further support of Bandura's retention section of the social learning theory. The scenarios also sparked discussions that supplied data in determining how important the variables gender (Sara's virginity), ethnicity (Charlie is interested in a black woman), and social class are (are these examples realistic to different ethnic groups). The use of scenarios was a key element in investigating what students are learning and can target the three variables to be explored.

Alexander (1985) found that the most important thing adolescents can learn from mass media are relationships. Sara's situation regarding her virginity and her relationship with her now ex-boyfriend, Bailey, illustrates Alexander's point.

A non-authoritative role on the part of the interviewer during the interviews was critical so the participants felt more comfortable, which in turn encouraged more spontaneous answers. This method made the students feel like they were having a conversation with one another rather than being interviewed. The participants needed to talk freely among one another rather than talk to the interviewer.

After the interviews were conducted, the researcher recorded the statistics of the focus group and its participants on a coding sheet (see Appendix F).

### Thematic Analysis

Data were analyzed using a thematic analysis approach. By definition, a theme is noted in relational discourse when three criteria are present: (1) recurrence, (2) repetition, and (3) forcefulness (Owen, 1984, p.275). Recurrence occurs when the same idea or meaning is indicated throughout parts of the dialogue, even though different words are used. For example, if several focus groups commented that the characters had loyalty for one another, and used phrases such as, “strong family,” and “close knit” those would be examples of recurrence. The same message of loyalty is conveyed using different words and terms throughout the dialogue.

The second characteristic of a theme is repetition, the explicit repeated use of the same wording. One instance could occur if the subjects describe Bailey’s personality using the terms “do-gooder” or “good guy.” The continuous use of one or two words to convey the same meaning satisfy the repetition requirement. The final portion of a theme is forcefulness, which “refers to vocal inflection, volume, or dramatic pauses which serve to stress and subordinate some utterances” (Owen, 1984, p. 275). Some students may describe the show as “so stupid,” “totally lame,” or “for little kids.” Forcefulness is important because it illustrates the extent of the feelings of some students that cannot be accounted for by merely reading answers from a survey.

A thematic analysis approach to data was best for the study for three reasons. First, the depth of the answers from the students were filled with “teen talk” and redundant, repetitive language and meanings. A thematic analysis allowed the freedom to

evaluate every recurrent message expressed by the students. Second, the prevalence of such themes solidified the feelings of the respondents and enabled the interviewer to give them more or less value by the number of times they are repeated. Finally, thematic analysis allowed the researcher to find exactly what and how the students were or were not learning from *Party*. Thematic analysis provided the freedom and latitude necessary to discover the most dominant messages the students were learning from *Party* and exactly how they received them. Themes were important to the study because they illustrated an adolescent's personal feelings, which cannot be accounted for merely by reading answers from a survey.

Certain recurring themes based on factors such as ethnic background, gender, and social class are influential in what and how people learn. It can be anticipated that significant themes would develop in those areas. The researcher believes there will be learning differences between students based on race, gender, and social class. Minority students might believe the show is unrealistic and not applicable in their lives because *Party* is about white, middle class people. Females could think that Sara, and her quest to remain a virgin, is a character they can relate to, whereas the males will probably not identify with Sara. Furthermore, it could be difficult for students of a less affluent lifestyle to find *Party* realistic. According to the students, realism is a major factor in determining identification.



## Results

The underlying question surrounding the methods of this study was “How can we ‘measure’ learning without empirical statistics?” Repetitious dialogue patterns and themes are the method of choice for this endeavor. As is evident in the focus groups, the students said they “learned” from this program by seeing the consequences of the characters’ actions (vicarious learning) or by gaining an insight to a problem they have not yet encountered. In some cases, the show reinforced behaviors the students already held, thereby solidifying a previous learning process. This is an example of external reinforcement. “Learning” came to be defined as gaining a general understanding of a given problem, or several problems, while indirectly experiencing the event through another person. Through the show, the students garnered a “verstehen” about their own lives and behaviors.

After conducting 13 focus group interviews, Bandura’s social learning theory was used to help explain what and how students learn from the program. The attention section targeted why the show is so popular among teenagers, and retention looked at which issues the students remembered. Imitation asked which solutions the students have applied in their lives, and motivation specified what the students believed they were learning.

In addition, several themes surfaced surrounding the variables ethnicity, gender, and social class. Ethnicity proved less of a factor in learning than expected. However, gender provided the biggest difference in terms of which messages, behaviors, or

characters the students identified. Finally, social class also supplied fewer differences in learning than previously expected.

It should be noted that the Supervising Producer of *Party of Five*, Ken Topolsky, was contacted via e-mail and he asked to receive a copy of this thesis to evaluate its results (see Appendix G).

### **Attention**

This portion of the social learning theory was the most intriguing because it would help answer why this particular show has taken teenage minds by storm. In the '90s, there have been many attempts to dominate the teenage and young adult markets, some failed - *Models Inc.* and *My So Called Life* - and some not, such as *Beverly Hills 90210* and *Melrose Place*. But what is it about this show that creates such an undying loyalty among its viewers? The answers covered the gamut.

### **Thematic Analysis**

Several common themes of discourse surfaced during the interviews. One male student said, "I watch the show because I can relate to it, and it has interesting characters." A female student said, "I like to see how the characters react to their problems." Another male said, "It brings out a lot of good issues, but it's still entertaining." Entertaining is a key word in the discourse. In this instance, the student refers positively to the content of the show, but is quick to remark that television is

television. This could have an effect on perceived learning. This issue will be revisited in the motivation section.

Other students compared *Party* to other shows within the same genre. One student said, "*Party of Five* is real life, not like *Melrose*." One male student commented, "*Melrose* has more action, more sex scenes. But it's not realistic." Another said, "I watch it because it's on after *90210*." One female said, "*Party of Five* is just more realistic than other shows."

The final ingredient in *Party*'s quest to capture the attention of young people is, to no surprise, attractive characters. One male student said, "The chicks are so hot." A female student exclaimed, "I love Bailey!" Another female student said, "It's all about Bailey." The affinity the students exhibited toward the physical prowess of the characters appeared to be a major factor in watching the program.

According to the students, *Party* is successful because of the powerful issues facing the characters. The students said they can almost see themselves in the same situations, with the same problems. Evidently, the students think the show handles these issues much better than other programs of its type. The overall essence of the program speaks to the students more than others shows targeted toward them. And finally, the characters seem less like gorgeous models and more like real people, although gorgeous and handsome certainly do not hurt. The word "realistic" was mentioned constantly during interviews, and served as a key theme in measuring the perception of learning from the show. This issue will be readdressed throughout the study.

## **Retention**

The issues and events the students remember also serve as a measurement of learning. Retention of specific events can further determine which messages the students believe are most important in their lives. This is a crucial step in the learning process because a student cannot apply something she saw on the show if she does not remember it. Again, the researcher provided no external stimuli to instigate the discussion. The students exhibited free recall in talking about the events of the program. Besides the events of the program, students also talked about the image of each character, or what that character stands for in his or her mind.

During the data collection, the program centered on Bailey's addiction to alcohol for about a month. In fact, one powerful episode titled "Intervention" was devoted to the family confronting Bailey about his drinking. Naturally, the students wanted to talk about Bailey and alcohol the most. This was also an example of a historical effect on data collection. For example, if someone were conducting a study on cults and Haley-Bop, the data and the entire study would be inaccurate due to the mass suicide in San Diego. The data in this study was not skewed, but, concerning retention, the discussions were dominated by Bailey because of the course of events in the show.

## **Thematic Analysis**

Regarding Bailey, one dialogue went like this: "Bailey's drinking is really depressing. I didn't think he'd start doing it. It was real sad. He was hurting his family."

"Yeah," replied another, "he was the good guy before, but not anymore."

"I mean drinking hurts everybody, not just you."

"Alcoholism ran in the family. Like, I've heard of the addiction gene."

"It shows how irresponsible people become and how he didn't care about the things he used to care about."

This excerpt was indicative of the focus groups. The students started with a character, discussed the major problem surrounding that person, and slowly began to develop a "big picture" of where that person and their problem fit into life. The students were exhibiting retention as they described Bailey's image and how it changed dramatically during the show.

Not surprisingly, most of the students' favorite episode concerned Bailey also. One student said:

Intervention was the best episode. It was so real life, that can really happen to a family. We all watched it together. We went to Becky's house. When *90210* was on we were laughing, talking, and having pillow fights. But during *Party of Five* we were quiet and almost crying at the end. We shared the moment. We're all in awe, it was a moving moment.

The researcher asked, "So did you learn anything about drinking and its consequences from that show?"

One student responded, "I don't know if I learned anything because I haven't experienced that yet." The group seemed to agree with her answer.

But quickly, another said, "I can relate with it because it makes you think about the effects of drinking and shows its consequences."

This was a classic example of the hesitancy to admit to learning from a television show. After this somewhat bold individual commented that she learned from the show, others followed suit. One student said, "It's amazing how Bailey blamed everything on everyone but himself. Oh, it can be his fault (in a sarcastic tone). Total denial."

A male student said, "I was surprised when Bailey went from casual drinker to hard core alcoholic. I didn't think it worked that way." In this case, the student learned that is almost always how a drinking problem begins.

Another male said in a terse voice, "God, people are so stupid! Why do they do that? I'm never going to be like that." Finally, a female student summed up the discussion:

After I watch the show, I think about it for a long time. I've had a tear in my eye after the last couple of shows. You know it happens to people. Even though it hasn't happened to you. You're getting an insight to what it's really like.

Later in the same focus group, a student remembered an issue that had not been discussed before, and would not come up in any subsequent groups. An obscure character named Libby received her acceptance letter from Stanford University. Two days later, Libby committed suicide. In her diary, Julia read how Libby felt enormous pressure to get into Stanford and doubted her abilities if she did get in. One senior female student said:

When Libby died that hit me especially hard. Around here (Monta Vista), you see a lot of people getting pushed really hard by their parents or themselves to do well. You think that would never happen. But it did.

Apparently, this issue had a strong impact on this student. It was surprising that more students did not remember or mention this topic, especially at Monta Vista where over-zealous parents are the norm.

Again, the most popular episode and the most discussed topic was Intervention and Bailey's drinking problem. But it seems as though the students received more than an entertaining hour of television. A lot of students said they witnessed and retained the turmoil alcoholism can cause a family. Sometimes without realizing it, they receive a crystal ball on problems they might be facing down the road.

### **Imitation**

For some of the students, part of the learning process may include applying what they have seen in the show into their own lives. It has been said that imitation is the highest form of flattery. The researcher wanted to discover if the students ever reflected on an issue in *Party* to resolve a conflict in their lives or the life of a friend. The students also may see themselves like one of the characters or have a favorite character. These issues would further exhibit learning from the show and increase the understanding of how Bandura's theory can help explain or illustrate that learning.

### **Thematic Analysis**

The researcher asked if anyone ever recalled an episode of the program to help them solve a problem. A female student said:

I remember when my family went through stuff about drugs and alcohol, like Bailey is. We had to go see my dad at de-tox. I've been thinking about all the drugs and alcohol that went through my house. I'm thankful that I wasn't old enough to remember it or go through the things the Salingers are going through now. But that's what it's like.

It seems as though this episode was almost therapeutic for this student. The program helped her work through some feelings that may not have been dealt with when she was a child. Another female student said, "When Bailey cheated on his girlfriend, that show helped my friend. Her boyfriend cheated on her too. Sara was right for dumping Bailey." This episode provided external reinforcement for this student's friend. It showed that cheating is completely unacceptable in intimate relationships. There is also a possibility that the alleged "friend" is actually the girl who experienced being cheated on.

Another student mentioned that he wished his friend could learn from the experiences of one of the characters. He said: "I don't want to name names, but I have a friend like Bailey, he drinks and drives. You tell him not to but he doesn't listen. It always takes something bad to happen before they do."

This student is hoping his friend can experience vicarious learning through Bailey's life. In the show, Bailey drove drunk and was involved in a car accident. Sara, his ex-girlfriend, was in the front seat and was hospitalized when she slammed her head on the windshield. Bailey had also driven his little brother, Owen, while drinking. One student angrily said, "I thought it was really screwed up when Bailey was drinking and driving with his little brother around. I was angry about that because I have a little sister." This student experienced external reinforcement. The show solidified a value that he held



previously. It is almost an example of anti-imitation: he saw the consequences of Bailey's behavior and refused to participate in it.

The students also were asked which character they identify with or relate to the most. One white female said, "I relate to Julia and her trouble with relationships." Another white female said, "I'm a mix of Julia and Sara." A Middle Eastern male said, "I relate to Charlie because he takes responsibility. When things have to get done, he does it." A white female said, "Sara's my favorite character because she can sing. I'm a singer too." An Asian female said, "I see myself like Bailey because I've been through his problems. Not quite as bad as him though."

Identification was a key component in the process of social learning, according to Bandura. Several students said that they identified with different characters on the show for one reason or another. However, there were stronger examples of identification in other areas of the research, namely in the discussions of ethnicity and gender. Identification with characters will be revisited in those discussions.

### **Motivation**

Motivation is probably the most exciting of the sections of the social learning theory. This portion probes what and how the students learn from the show, if anything. In the attention discussion, the students said that they watch the show because it has good messages, attractive characters, and is better than *90210* or *Melrose Place*. But the motivation section revealed exactly what the students take away from the program and addressed if they think they are learning. The students also expressed a criticism of the

show. To no surprise, the focus groups could never quite decide if they learned from the show.

### Thematic Analysis

One such dialogue illustrates this point:

"I think everyone can relate to it a little bit. It was scary for me to see Bailey get so caught up in drinking like that."

"I don't think it's real. It's just a show."

"You have to learn from your own experiences. You can't learn from a show."

"No, it's entertainment but you can learn from it. I have alcoholism in my family and I've been through the same things."

"All the conflicts are real but they don't happen all at once, to one family."

"It's as real as a TV show can get."

"I don't think the drinking thing's real because Bailey's parents were killed by a drunk driver. If your parents were killed that way, would you drink?"

"I don't agree with that. If he wants to drink, he's going to drink, but not because of his past."

"It's real because most shows wouldn't discuss it (alcoholism)."

"I think they're starting to get too many issues in the show. The last thing you want is for it to get like a soap opera."

"I think you can see what's right and wrong, but you can never learn anything until you experience it for yourself."

"It registers, but it's like subliminal. But it's all stuff you've been taught."

In this group, some students believed the show was real and they could learn from it, and some did not. However, the students who said it was just television were also the ones talking about all the issues they remembered. They said the alcoholism was an accurate portrayal and later that it's just entertainment. This is a big contradiction. It is possible that the students refuse to believe that a television could be trying to communicate a message and that they might accept the message.

Another discussion on learning follows:

"These are things that can happen. And, um, on *90210* there are things that are retarded, you know. But this is real."

"It's realistic but they add a lot for entertainment."

"Some issues are real and some aren't. I don't think Charlie would be in charge. And he runs the restaurant and their house is pretty nice."

"But the things they deal with are real, like alcoholism."

"It's so unlikely that all that happens to one family. But it's more real than *Melrose*."

"It's the closest thing to real life."

This group also exhibits the conflict concerning real versus unreal. Again, the same students who expressed vicarious reinforcement also said it's just a TV show. In addition, this group shared the same criticism as the others: sometimes the show is too problematic.

However some students were bold enough to say they could learn from the characters' problems. One said, "I think it's interesting to see how they solve their

problems. There's lessons I can learn." Another said, "Yeah, I put myself in their position and think what I would do. I think about the problems after the show." About half the students said this in one way or another but they were hesitant. But almost every student agreed with this statement: "There should be more shows like *Party* because other shows for young people are stupid. There's a witch show and other things. There should be one or two more."

### **Ethnicity**

The issue of ethnicity and race were hot topics during the interviews. The students expressed surprisingly similar comments about the diversity of the show's characters, the presence of a certain character, and the effect on realism and identification ethnicity can play. One focus group was completely comprised of minorities at San Jose High: 13 Hispanic students and 1 Black student. However, the focus group provided no data that was different from the mixed race groups.

Only one major character on *Party of Five* is a minority - Grace, Charlie's recently ex-girlfriend. But Grace's character, not necessarily her skin color, was on the forefront of the minds of the students.

### **Thematic Analysis**

One such dialogue follows:

"I think it's cool that they have interracial dating on the show but Grace's gross. I hate watching her. The only reason they have her is for publicity. They (the producers) have to have a black character on the show" (White female).

"It's sad they have a black character on the show that has such a bad character. It puts black people down as actors" (White female).

"No, you guys, she's a good actress, her character is bad. Grace is the one who's prejudiced because she's uncomfortable about dating a white guy" (Middle East male).

"TV should make more of an effort for diversity" (Hispanic female).

"Yeah, because without that diversity, the show doesn't seem as realistic. I can't relate that well" (Middle East male).

"No, the show's about the family, not about race. Race has nothing to do with it" (Middle East female).

"See, the show's not too-white. They're just a white family" (Middle East female).

"Obviously, since they're a white family, they can't have a black brother and an Asian sister. But all the boyfriends, girlfriends, and friends are white, except Grace. It would be more real if they had minority characters. But don't have token characters in the main group" (Middle East male).

This focus group expressed some strong feelings regarding Grace's character and the lack of diversity on the program. Many of the students said that race was not an issue, but apparently, other students in the group believe that it was. One Middle Eastern student even said the lack of minority actors affected his ability to identify and relate.

However, not all the students said that Grace's character was bad, or that the lack of minority characters bothered them. One white female said, "I like Grace. She seems to have it together. I respect her." Another white female said, "I like her, she's different. She's not what you think Charlie would go for." An Asian female said:

To me, everyone's equal. I can relate with them. I don't think of them as white so much because it's just TV. But I do think there should be more Asians on TV. It would make the show better.

A black female said sternly, "I like her 'cause she's black. She's the only sister on the show. There's only one black person, the show needs more black people." The researcher asked if there was anything else this student liked about Grace. "Yeah, she's black," she reiterated. This student is showing some signs of imitation and identification, but not completely. She never mentioned anything about Grace's character or actions and relating to her. But her point is made clearly: Without black people she cannot relate as fully as white viewers.

But a Pacific Islander female said, "You can relate to the problems regardless of what race you are." This student expressed the sentiments of the clear majority of all the students interviewed: The show is not about race, it's about the family and their problems. Those problems are representative of all ethnicities. However, more minority characters would improve realism and identification.

Reflecting on social learning theory, Bandura's four phases of learning are affected by ethnicity, but it's not as important as the researcher originally believed. Imitation was the section of the theory most affected by ethnicity because some minority students could not see themselves like the characters. But their problems were very similar. The vast majority of the students, white or minority, said they can relate to the characters' problems, regardless of their heritage.

## **Gender**

Gender provided the most themes of any variable. The results were not as surprising as others, but males and females identified and learned different things from the program. Originally, the researcher suspected that gender would have a large impact on the issue of virginity. Sara, Bailey's ex-girlfriend, is a virgin and wants to remain so until she gets married. One night Bailey and Sara came very close to having sex, though. They set up the room with candles and soft music, but it did not happen. The researcher believed that the female subjects would identify strongly with Sara's character and her values regarding sex. This was accurate, however, it was not as dominant as expected. Much of this had to do with the females' enormous infatuation with Bailey. One focus group consisted entirely of females. However, this group did not provide any new data that was not discussed in other groups. In addition, males identified with Charlie and the responsibility he has assumed with the family.

## **Thematic Analysis**

One discussion regarding virginity follows:

"I think it's respectable that she's a virgin but it's getting annoying. She's in love with him, he's in love with her. It's like, let it go already, calm down" (White female).

"That was so phony how they set it up with candles and stuff. It's not like that, it was stupid" (Middle East female).

"I see a lot of me in her, even though she's a push-over sometimes. She's a really good addition to the show. She's good for him. Look at his last girlfriend (drug problems)" (White female).

"Being a virgin's fine, but I don't think she wants to be" (Hispanic female).

"I think they pay too much attention to it. OK, she's a virgin. It's too much of a big deal" (White female).

"I don't think she was ready for it. She only did that to keep Bailey" (Middle East female).

"Not many people in high school are ready for it" (White female).

"It's cool. She shouldn't be forced to do it" (Middle East male).

"I'm totally cool with her decision" (Middle East male).

Many students thought the virginity issue was overdone and redundant. They were tired of hearing about Sara's decision and the staged sexual encounter between her and Bailey. None of the males dared to say that Sara should sleep with Bailey, for whatever reason. Every student said that her decision was "cool." Apparently, Sara and the show were reinforcing values held by several of the females who said people should wait to have sex. The student who said she saw herself like Sara exhibited imitation because she believed that Sara and she had a lot in common. In addition, Sara's position on sex provided external reinforcement for this girl's decision. Another female said:

If she doesn't want to have sex until she gets married, that's cool.  
Look, Bailey cheated on her and she could have given it away. I  
think you should wait until you know you're going to be in love forever.



This student experienced vicarious learning from Sara's life. She saw that Sara's chastity was the right decision in the long run. Other students made similar comments regarding Bailey's infidelity. A dialogue with the all-female group follows:

"It's good that she dumped him."

"Yeah, it's good because she gave him lots of chances and she tried to work it out."

"They were always fighting and arguing. She should have broken up with him sooner."

"She only wanted to sleep with him to get him back anyway."

"I totally respect her decision. If she wants to save it, then she should."

This is another example of learning because these girls saw exactly how cheating can destroy a relationship. In the imitation section, one female said that her friend's boyfriend cheated on her and the show helped her affirm that she did the right thing. No one, male or female, said that Bailey deserved another chance.

But many of the females interviewed had more than Bailey's cheating on their minds. Caucasian females could not stop talking about how "gorgeous," "cute," and "totally hot" Bailey is. They raved about his hair, eyes, body, dimples, and how he cried. They spoke of him non-stop. "I love Bailey," said one. "If I could have Bailey's children, I would," said another. One student admitted, "If he was my boyfriend, I'd have sex with him." "He's hot." "He's got an awesome body." The parade of Bailey accolades continued until the researcher moved to San Jose High, where the Bailey infatuation ended. Many females admitted that they watched the show because of him. This is definitely not an

example of learning, but it does show a difference in gender viewing habits. Many males said that they watched the show because the females are attractive, but their reactions did not compare to those of the females. The females were so outspoken about Bailey. One female went into long detail about his body while her boyfriend was sitting next to her. The theme was ridiculously ever-present.

But the female students did learn a valuable lesson from Bailey's sister, Julia. Julia was pregnant and decided she was going to have an abortion. A few days before the abortion, she had a miscarriage. The producers of *Party* buckled under the pressure they received from different groups against the abortion. Julia would have been the first prime-time character in television history to have an abortion. But the consequences of sex weighed heavily on the girls' minds. One female said, "Look what happened to Julia. She got pregnant and had a miscarriage. I was like OK, no. We could see the problems of having sex." Another said, "Julia's experiences teach you the values of safe sex because you don't want to go through what she went through and have a miscarriage." Another female said, "I was mad that they changed it to Julia having a miscarriage. They gave in to the pressure." A few minutes later, the researcher asked if there was anything these students could learn from the show. They all responded "no." Again, Bandura's vicarious learning is clear, but there is a hesitancy to admit to learning. Each of these students participated in separate focus groups, meaning on three different occasions these students refused to admit to learning. The show may have reinforced a value they already held but they did not admit to that either.

On the other hand, male students felt a strong connection to Charlie and the amount of responsibility he carries. They were also more apt to admit that Charlie could be seen as a role model. During the course of the show, Charlie has gone from a playboy, ladies man to a “bread-winning” father for the kids. No male student ever mentioned identifying with Charlie because he used to be very popular with women. But several discussed his new-found maturity. Excerpts from different focus groups follow:

“Charlie takes all the responsibility and takes care of the family.”

“Charlie is responsible. He took a chance raising the family and taking care of the kids. He supports everyone.”

“Charlie has a conflict because he has to be a father and brother. He has all this responsibility loaded on him.”

“He’s a cool guy. He handles everything.”

“We don’t give Charlie enough credit. He’s given up his life as an adult.”

Male students believed Charlie was a good father and provider for the family. They also spoke more openly about relating to him, whereas females identified with Sara’s attitude toward sex but not as often as anticipated. Moreover, the girls seemed more receptive to discussing Julia’s pregnancy. There were so many examples of imitation based on identification, gender proved to be a very influential factor regarding what the students said they learned and by watching whom. It appears that there is a strong correlation between what is learned and gender.

### **Social class**

The researcher believed perceptions of realism concerning the show could be influenced by the social class of the students. For example, would students from San Jose High, a less affluent school, think that the middle class show is real? Or would Monta Vista students, a middle to upper class school, say the program is real? For the most part, social class made little difference. However, some San Jose students, especially females, noted several material things about the characters that they believed were unrealistic, but Monta Vista students did not. Moreover, San Jose students who watched the show were difficult to find, which could result from a social class discrepancy between the show and the San Jose students. In different focus groups, San Jose students mentioned differences between their lifestyles and those of the characters.

### **Thematic Analysis**

“They all have cars. Everyone on the show has one except for the baby” (Hispanic female).

“They all have nice clothes. They all wear *Guess* and *DKNY* clothes. They’re all rich” (Hispanic female).

“They ain’t got no friends. You never see them at school. None of them have jobs” (Hispanic female).

These students were of the minority opinion regarding the lifestyles of the characters. But none of these statements is false, based on jealousy, yes, but not false. All the characters on the show who are old enough to drive have cars. The female characters

do wear fashionable clothing, and Charlie is the only character who works. It appears that there are different perceptions of realism between the social classes, however, besides these students, not many of the San Jose students mentioned any. Virtually all the students from both schools categorized the show as “middle class.” Each time a San Jose student said the show was unrealistic, someone contradicted that person’s opinion.

“Julia’s not going to college was a big mistake. Some people would kill to go to Stanford and she’s throwing her opportunity away” (Hispanic male).

“She don’t need to go to college. She owns a restaurant” (Hispanic female).

“Yeah she does. Everyone should go to college” (Hispanic male).

Another focus group’s dialogue follows:

“People are saying the show’s real, but in actuality it’s not. The parents are dead. The brother’s an alcoholic. The older brother raises the family” (Hispanic male).

“How many brothers actually raise their family?” (Hispanic male)

“No, the things they go through are real” (Pacific Islander female).

Apparently, some students did have a concern with the program’s realism, but their opinions were countered by a classmate. But there were occasions that other students did not argue. Some students absolutely hated certain characters and repeated their comments several times. Lemish (1985) coined the word “challenger” for a viewer who made disparaging remarks about the show or its characters, yet continued to watch each week. Only one Monta Vista student and one San Jose student exhibited challenger behavior. The Monta Vista student, a white female, said:

“Sara’s really annoying. I liked Callie better even though she’s a bad influence.”

“Sara’s too skinny. I don’t like it when she sings.”

“She’s so annoying, especially when she tried to find her mom.”

“Sara gives a bad impression of teenage girls because she’s so skinny.”

This student was a little overweight, so her contempt for Sara’s figure may have been due to that. Lemish documented that some viewers make comments like this but never stop watching the show.

On the other hand, a Hispanic female from San Jose High said how Sara should have beaten another character for stealing her boyfriend. She said, “I think Sara and Callie should fight. Like when they were at the hospital, Sara should have laid her out and knocked her mouth in.” Later she said, “I want to run Callie over with a car.”

This student also expressed that the characters led privileged lives and it was not realistic. But she watches the show every week and knows what every character has ever been through.

Although many San Jose High students said the show seemed upper class, the clear majority thought the program was very representative in its depiction of a middle class lifestyle. Students from both schools said the show was realistic, but some San Jose students noted that some of the aspects of the characters’ lives are not middle class or realistic to them. Furthermore, heavy viewers at San Jose High were much harder to find, meaning that viewing could be based on social class.

## Discussion

Given the findings of this study, what can be said about the power of popular culture to influence young minds? According to these results, popular culture can positively influence the behaviors of adolescents while teaching them about life. Student after student said that he or she learned different lessons from certain characters. Most of the time these were lessons they have not yet experienced and were able to see both the benefits and the consequences. The students learned vicariously through the characters and received external and self reinforcement for behaviors and values they already held, as Bandura said that would be a factor. They said that there need to be more shows like *Party of Five* that young people can relate to because *Melrose Place* and *90210* do not work for them.

Yet, every time we turn on the television, popular culture is being blamed for “causing” a tragedy, or that young people are being harmed from exposure to inappropriate material in movies and on the Internet. But just maybe, a program has arrived that is here to educate, while entertaining its viewers.

The children are the cause celebre of society. Everyone and anyone with an organization and a mission statement is allying with parent groups in the hopes of saving the children from popular culture. But is that necessary? Can't popular culture be beneficial to young people also? This study posits that entertaining forms of mass media can, and are, being used to educate.

As is the case with any good study, this thesis hopes to further knowledge in its field, media effects, and answer the “So what” question. The results of this study support the hypothesis that high school students are learning from *Party of Five*. The program is an example that popular culture, while still predicated on capitalism and advertising, can successfully communicate a message to its viewers.

So where does this study fit the “big picture” of media effects studies?

Significant contributions have been made in the following areas:

- one of a few qualitative studies on popular culture
- first study on a prime-time soap opera
- first soap opera study since the boom of the genre’s popularity in the early 1980s, led by *General Hospital*
- first to use a social learning theoretical approach rather than uses and gratifications or cultivation analysis
- first study to ask “*What* do they learn,” not just “*Why* do they watch?”

The social learning theory also demonstrated its flexibility and durability in addressing concerns about media effects. As was written earlier, prior studies used cultivation analysis and uses and gratifications. But this study showed how the social learning theory could adapt and maintain its validity after almost 30 years. Bandura had also not applied the theory to a study about positive social effects of media. This study clearly showed what can be learned while viewing the program and how behavior is shaped.



After conducting a comprehensive literature review, the researcher was shocked to find so many studies predicated on previous studies. Time after time, studies were conducted to discover why people watched soap operas, even after it was determined that they watch for fantasy, escape, and entertainment. Cultivation analysis studies provided some relevant data regarding the skewed perceptions of the real world due to heavy exposure to soap operas. But no one asked the “What” question. This study asked “What do they learn” and “What can we teach?”

The media bombards its viewers and readers with redundant stories about a young person who committed suicide after listening to an Ozzy Osborne song. Not only is that premise hackneyed and wrong, but it’s inaccurate. Conveniently, they forget to mention that the youth had a history of drug and alcohol use. This study hopes to change a misconstrued perception that the mass media, in whatever form, is warping the minds of young people.

### **Conclusion**

The fundamental question behind this study was “Can popular culture teach us?” Growing concern regarding the Internet and new television ratings has sparked a major push for the regulation of an alleged doomed, macabre industry. The concern is warranted and regulation is needed. This study posits, however, that not all forms of entertainment are bad. Young people are growing and learning from *Party of Five* and yearning for more programming like it.

Social learning theory provided a solid theoretical framework for the study because it encompasses all the stages of observational learning. It allowed the researcher to see exactly what students are learning from *Party* and how they are identifying with the characters and their problems. The theory grounded the study in what captured the students' attention, what and why they retained certain episodes, which attitudes and behaviors they may have imitated, and their motivation for doing so. Social learning theory was the best match to answer the research question because it was created to answer the questions surrounding learning. Past studies offered a uses and gratifications approach or a cultivation analysis theory. These studies repetitively answered the question "Why do they watch soap operas?" However, social learning theory allowed the study to go a step further and ask "What are they learning, if anything?"

Furthermore, a thematic analysis approach to the data analysis was crucial because it displayed recurrent patterns of discourse exhibited during the focus group interviews. Themes provided what is most important and most prevalent to the students about *Party*. In addition, the themes supplied some interesting dialogue to explain what and how the students were learning.

For future research, the researcher would recommend doing additional focus groups to enhance the generalizability of the study. Time and finding enough students to participate are the only obstacles to overcome, and if there is plenty of time there are always more people to interview. Second, a study could benefit from including students from an upper class school and discovering themes in their discourse and patterns of behavior.

*Party of Five* has tackled many controversial issues since its inception in 1994. Programs dealing with death, teen sex, and loyalty to family could have provided viewers with more than an hour of entertainment and a “get away” from real life. *Party* has illustrated to many adolescents that they are not alone in their struggle to grow up.

If children are the number one concern in society, perhaps exposing them to more shows like *Party of Five* will have positive benefits. Popular culture can teach, at least that is the case for the students in this study.

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## Appendix A

### Survey Questions

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

1) Grade:

junior          senior

2) Gender:

male          female

3) Ethnicity: \_\_\_\_\_

4) Average television viewing per week:

1-5 hours      6-10 hours      11 or more

5) Have you ever watched *Party of Five*?

yes          no

6) How many times a month do you watch *Party of Five*?

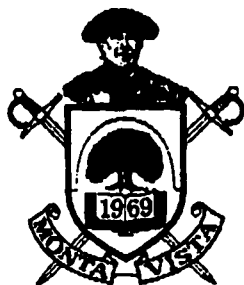
never      1      2      3      4      every episode

7) Would you be willing to participate in small group interviews that ask questions about *Party of Five*?

yes          no



## **Appendix B**



# MONTA VISTA HIGH SCHOOL

21840 McClellan Road  
Cupertino, CA 95014

(408) 366-7600

November 20, 1996

Nino Repetti  
Graduate Student  
San Jose State University

Dear Nino:

I am in receipt of your letter dated 11/12/96 requesting that you survey 75-100 students at Monta Vista High School for your graduate thesis paper. I have reviewed your proposal and understand the needs requested.

It will be my pleasure to work with you and Virgil Pate, chairman of the Social Studies Department, to secure the needed students for your study. We are willing to request students to participate, file the needed parent permission slips, and provide you with a room to conduct your study.

Please contact me when you are ready to begin seeking subjects.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads 'Joanne Laird'.

Joanne Laird  
Assistant Principal



**SAN JOSE UNIFIED  
SCHOOL DISTRICT**

Laurence Holguin, Principal

**SAN JOSE HIGH ACADEMY**

*All Students Can Learn... All Students Can Succeed!*

November 15, 1996

To Whom It May Concern:

Nino Repetti has approached me regarding his thesis project and I have given my support of the project and student interviews within the state and district guidelines.

Please contact me if you have any questions.

Sincerely,

Laurence Holguin  
Principal

/jd

cc: Nino Repetti

## **Appendix C**

## Demographics of the students

Table 1 - General Statistics

	Students	Male	Female	Juniors	Seniors
Monta Vista	78	18	60	38	40
San Jose	49	19	30	20	29
<b>Totals</b>	<b>127</b>	<b>37</b>	<b>90</b>	<b>58</b>	<b>69</b>
<b>Totals in %</b>	<b>-</b>	<b>29%</b>	<b>71%</b>	<b>46%</b>	<b>54%</b>

Table 2 - Racial make-up

	White	Asian	Hispanic	Black	Middle Eastern	Pacific Islander	Mixed
Monta Vista	48	16	6	0	6	2	0
San Jose	2	10	32	2	0	1	2
<b>Totals</b>	<b>50</b>	<b>26</b>	<b>38</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Totals in %</b>	<b>39%</b>	<b>21%</b>	<b>30%</b>	<b>2%</b>	<b>5%</b>	<b>2%</b>	<b>2%</b>

## **Appendix D**

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**School of Journalism and Mass Communications**

One Washington Square • San José, California 95192-0055 • 408/924-3240 • Fax 408/924-3229

### Permission Slip

To: Monta Vista High School Parents

From: Nino Repetti

Re: Parental permission to allow your son/daughter to participate in interviews for a thesis project

I am a graduate student at San Jose State University and am writing a thesis paper this semester. I am conducting a study about what and how students learn from watching the program *Party of Five*. I want to know if the program helps students understand they are not the only young people with problems, and if the show offers solutions the students use in their own lives.

I propose to conduct interviews with groups of 10 students and ask why they watch *Party of Five*, what messages about life does it teach them and how do they identify with the characters. The interviews will be conducted at lunch or after school so the students will not miss any class time. The group interviews will provide a forum for the students to discuss their honest feelings about the program and how it relates to their lives, if at all.

The names of the students will be kept confidential. I will only ask the students their names so I will know which teacher to contact in setting up the interviews. The students' names will be kept in a locked cabinet in my home. At no time will your son/daughter be forced to continue with the interviews or asked to share any personal information. In order to collect the students' thoughts, I will be recording the interviews on tape. If the students feel uncomfortable about being recorded, I will turn off the recorder.

These interviews are strictly voluntary and I am asking your permission for your son/daughter to participate in our study. The San Jose State University Human Subjects committee has approved this study. I will make the interviews as much fun as possible for the students since this is a topic I think they will enjoy. Again, I want to stress our commitment to confidentiality of your child's identity and I will make sure they are as comfortable as possible during the interviews.

If you have any questions regarding the study or would like more information, please feel free to contact Nino Repetti at 252-4451, or my advisor, Dr. Kathleen Martinelli at 924-3285. In addition, if you have questions regarding the rights of the students who participate in the study, please call Serena Stanford with the San Jose State University Human Subjects Committee at (408) 924-2480.

---

**School of Journalism and Mass Communications**

One Washington Square • San José, California 95192-0055 • 408/924-3240 • Fax 408/924-3229

I give my consent for \_\_\_\_\_ to be interviewed for this study.

Signed \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Relation to child \_\_\_\_\_

Researcher signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_



## **Appendix E**

## **Interview Questions**

### **Icebreakers**

How old are you?

Do you have a TV in your bedroom?

How many of your friends watch *Party*?

Whom do you watch with?

Is it important to watch the show with a parent or friend? Why?

### **Attention**

Why do you watch *Party of Five*?

Are the attractive characters the main reasons you watch the show?

What's the difference between *Party* and *90210* or *Melrose Place*? Are those differences good or bad?

Who is your favorite character and why?

Should there be more shows like *Party*? Why?

Would you advise teenagers to watch *Party*? Why or why not?

Who is the cutest guy?

Who is the prettiest girl?

Do you see the characters as rich or poor or middle class?

Can you relate to them?

### **Retention**

What is your favorite episode and why?

What are some of the topics or issues *Party* has tried to cover?

What do the characters stand for in your mind? What's their image or style?

Who's your favorite character? Why?

Who's your least favorite? Why?

What do you think the show is all about?

What do you think of Charlie dating a black woman?

Is Bailey an alcoholic?

What do you think of Sara wanting to remain a virgin until she gets married?

### **Imitation**

Should *Party* characters be role models for teenagers? Why or why not?

Do any of your friends remind you of a character on *Party*? Why?

Do any of the characters remind you of yourself?

If you had to guess which female characters most girls try to be like, who would it be and why? Same question for the male characters.

When helping a friend have you ever reflected back to an episode of *Party* that might have dealt with the same problem? Which one?

### **Motivation**

Do a lot of teens talk about *Party* the day after a new episode?

Can teenagers learn something from *Party*? What?

Do you think the show is realistic? What is or what isn't?

Do you think *Party* presents a message that applies equally to all teenagers, no matter what race, religion, or color?

## Appendix F

**Coding Sheet**

School:

Male Female TotalJuniors SeniorsWhite Asian Hispanic BlackMiddle East Pacific Islander Mixed

## **Appendix G**

Author: KennTOP@aol.com at Internet  
Date: 4/5/97 12:22 PM  
Priority: Normal  
TO: NINO REPETTI at UNIGSD01  
Subject: Re: Re[2]: master's thesis

----- Message Contents -----

Nino

Please send your thesis to:

Ken Topolsky  
Party of Five  
SONY STUDIOS  
10202 West Washington Blvd.  
LOY 29  
Culver City, CA 90232

Once again, good luck.

be well

Ken Topolsky  
Party of Five